

Stolen jewel box recovered

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Oakland Museum piece missing for seven years

By Harry Harris

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A lunchtime chat in San Francisco about a gold quartz ring led to the recovery of a historic jewel box valued at more than \$100,000 that was stolen from the Oakland Museum seven years ago.

The 7-by-9 inch box, exquisitely lined with gold-bearing moss quartz and depicting early California scenes, is known as the "Comstock Jewel Casket." It was purchased in 1969 for \$11,400 by an anonymous donor and given to the museum.

Someone broke into the museum display case in March 1978 and took the jewelry box, along with a \$10,000 giant ivory eagle.

The eagle was recovered, but after seven years the Comstock casket was feared lost forever.

Then last Thursday, a chance encounter led to its recovery in a storage room of Butterfield and Butterfield Auctioneers

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and Art Appraisers in San Francisco.

It had been with them since early January of this year and was scheduled to go on the auction block in June.

Oakland Police Sgts. Brad Kearns and Sid Rice yesterday retraced the casket's odyssey.

William E. Murray was arrested in 1980 for the 1978 museum burglary. Murray admitted taking the items, and police recovered the eagle. But Murray told police the jewel box had been stolen in 1978 from a San Leandro storage locker where he had hidden it. He eventually pleaded guilty to burglary and was sentenced to state prison, gaining his release in 1982.

Meanwhile, according to the sergeants, the box ended up — sometime in 1978 — in the home of a Walnut Creek man who they declined to name because they don't think he knew it was stolen property.

The man became ill last year and died last November.

During his illness he was cared for by his brother and sister-in-law and as a form of payment gave the box to his sister-in-law, who police also declined to name, saying she had no knowledge it was stolen.

The woman decided to sell the box through Butterfields in January. Kearns and Rice said the firm also did not know of the object's purloined past.

On Thursday, Michael Weller, owner of Argentum Antiques in San Francisco, who has visited the Oakland Museum on many occasions and is quite familiar with its art objects, had lunch with a Butterfield employee.

Weller happened to be wearing a gold quartz ring similar to material used in making the box. That caught the eye of his companion, who mentioned his firm had recently acquired a gold-quartz jewelry box.

Weller immediately thought of the missing Comstock piece and after lunch contacted Thomas Frye, museum curator, who called police. Late Thursday, Frye, Kearns and Rice made the trip to San Francisco, where an elated Frye identified the box as the museum's and took possession.

Yesterday, the box was in a vault at the museum but Frye said it should be back on display soon. He said he was "utterly delighted" for its return and added: "We can be thankful for the friends the museum has."

The box was made in about 1875 by a San Francisco goldsmith and is crafted with the natural quartz, heavily veined in California gold in tones of gray and cream. The interior of the top is recessed and engraved with scenes of Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroad trains, Indians and buffalo herds.